What is an Annotated Bibliography?

So, you’ve been assigned to create an annotated bibliography. I’m sure you’re overjoyed, but it’s actually not as bad as it sounds. To create one, you find a source, you cite it, you summarize it, and then you evaluate it. Each time you do those three things, you produce an entry. Rinse and repeat for six or ten or however many sources your instructor requires, and you’ve got yourself an annotated bibliography.

This might sound tedious. However, like most things that are worth doing, you get something in exchange for your effort. Annotated bibliographies are actually time-savers in the long run, and they help you produce better work. That’s because they augment your memory when you’re working on a research project.

See, human memory stinks. You know what the LEAST reliable form of legal evidence is? Eyewitness testimony. It’s true, look it up. Memory just can't be trusted. So in the same way it's easier to shop for groceries with a list, it's helpful to make a record of the sources you find, and to scribble down what you think they’re good for. That way you don't have to be constantly re-reading the bloody things.

Annotated bibliographies consist of a series of entries. In turn, each entry consists of three parts: a citation, a summary, and an evaluation. On paper, it’ll look something like this depending on your assignment:


Lamott’s book offers honest advice on the nature of a writing life, complete with its insecurities and failures. Taking a humorous approach to the realities of being a writer, the chapters in Lamott’s book are wry and anecdotal and offer advice on everything from plot development to jealousy, from perfectionism to struggling with one's own internal critic. In the process, Lamott includes writing exercises designed to be both productive and fun.*

*From the Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue:
https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/03/

The citation comes first, and more or less acts as the header for that entry. The summary and evaluation cozy up and hang out together in this chunk of text down here.
The citation has its own line at the top of the entry, and should be properly formatted, like MLA, APA, or whatnot-- copying and pasting in a just a title or a web address and calling it done DOES NOT CUT IT. With citations, details matter. If you want a hand with formatting a citation, there's plenty of help out there. Ask a librarian, either online or in-person, use RefWorks (which is our online citation tool), or make an appointment with your instructor.

The summary is a brief restatement, in your own words, of the source's main ideas. "Brief" means one to three sentences in length. "Your own words" means you have to explain, without copying someone else's words or their sentence structure, what you think that source was all about. Also, for a summary to be good, it has to maintain a neutral perspective: you're writing down what the source was about, not your opinion of it.

The evaluation is where your opinions go, but not just any opinions. It should be your opinions about what the source is good for in relation to your project. You don’t need to write a novel here. You just answer a few questions about the source and write down the answers. These questions might consist of:

- What information does this source contribute to your research question?
- Does this source’s author appear to be biased? If so, in what way?
- How can you use this sources in your research project?

There’s also a good chance your instructor will have some suggestions.

Let's recap. Annotated bibliographies are lists of sources you plan to use in a research project. Each source gets its own entry, and each entry consists of a citation, a summary, and an evaluation. Citations must be properly formatted; summaries briefly restate the source's main ideas from a neutral perspective; and evaluations contain your opinions about what each source is good for. Creating one of these things can be tedious, but they save you time, even if it doesn’t feel like it, and they help you improve the quality of your work. Because human memory is... something I can't quite recall. Hmph.